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What students say about motivating experiences in a whole language classroom

Oldfather, an Assistant Professor at The University of Georgia and an investigator at the National Reading Research Center, conducts research on students' motivation for literacy and constructivism in teaching and learning.

Students have much to teach us about how to create motivating classrooms. For example, Abigail, a fifth grader, provided insight on the importance of choice for her motivation for literacy. She explained that “what you *want* to know is usually funner stuff.” This article presents a portrait, as seen through the eyes of Abigail and her classmates, one exemplary whole language classroom. This classroom portrait is based on research findings from an 8-month collaborative inquiry of student motivation that I initiated in which students from a combined fifth- and sixth-grade classroom participated as coresearchers (Oldfather, 1991a, 1991b; Oldfather et al., 1991; Oldfather & Thomas, 1991). The students are in their fourth year as coresearchers and will continue in that role through high school.

The students' motivation for literacy was connected to two key interactive elements in the classroom. The first was an emphasis on students' construction of what Susan Holmes, the classroom teacher, referred to as the “rich broth of meaning” that permeated the curriculum. The second was a deep responsiveness of the classroom culture to students' expression: written, oral, and artistic. I have called this condition of deep responsiveness *honored voice* (Oldfather, 1991a, 1991b).

The concept of *voice* encompasses not only the expression of thought but also the development of thought and a sense of agency (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Shor & Freire, 1987). Literacy processes of reading, writing, and speaking can be an integral part of students' self-discovery and empowerment as they are involved in "the having of wonderful ideas" (Duckworth, 1987). In a classroom that honored their voices, students were empowered. They made many choices about what to learn and how to learn; thus, they became personally invested and connected to their literacy activities.

The classroom context

I conducted this research at Willow School, which is located in southern California. The names of the school and the teacher in this article are pseudonyms; however, the student coresearchers' actual first names are used at their request. Students at Willow have a sense that their school is a special place to learn and that being there makes a difference in their lives, as Paul, a sixth-grade student, commented: "Once you've dipped in, you can't get it off. Once you're in a school like this with that good philosophy and you have my teacher, you can't [go back to] a regular school."

The students were "dipped into" Susan Holmes's fifth- and sixth-grade classroom. About 30% of the students in Willow were of African-, Mexican-, or Asian-American backgrounds. The school was situated in an academic community, and a few of the students were children of college professors. The district had open enrollment, allowing parents and children the choices of which elementary school to attend. About half of the students attending Willow chose to come from neighborhoods outside the school's regular attendance area.

Most classes in the school were intentionally structured to include multigrade and multiage levels, and students' strengths, rather than their problems, were emphasized. Susan's classroom represented the school's diversity. Almost one-third of the students were eligible for special services through the resource teacher, ESL, or speech and language clinicians. Working with the resource specialist was perceived by many students as

an honor, rather than as an indication of a problem or deficit: "You have to pass a special test to try to go there," as one student commented.

In Susan's classroom, students' desks were arranged in groups of four or five, allowing for small group work. There were plants around the room and a guinea pig and white rats in cages. Shel Silverstein's (1974) poem "Invitation" was copied by hand on a large poster and prominently displayed, befitting Susan's welcoming of students' imagination and dreams. The room was full of students' illustrated poems, stories written on the computer and placed in handmade illustrated books, and art projects using a variety of media. There were hundreds of carefully chosen books, many relating to the thematic unit being studied.

Students were actively engaged in an integrated, thematic curriculum. They read self-selected books and they shared books. They kept dialogue journals and reading logs. Stu-

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dents wrote avidly in a variety of genres during writing workshop and in all subject areas throughout the day. Students published some of their work through Willow's schoolwide publishing house. No grades were given; report cards were in narrative form.

A respectful, responsive classroom culture

Susan's classroom was buzzing with readers and writers who shared her contagious sense of excitement about learning. Paul, a sixth grader, described his school:

Students at Willow are different. Instead of not wanting to read, they'll read. Instead of not wanting to write, they'll write. They want to write. One of the things I love in school is that we're trying to learn—not just get the right answer. That's really good. You want to get the right answer but you still learn. You do better because learning is more important than getting the right answer.

In keeping with Susan's emphasis on making sense of things, she respected students' answers and interpretations. She encouraged students to admit freely "I don't understand this yet" or "I understand this differently." In making it safe for students to express themselves, Susan had better access to their thinking processes. This enabled her to respond more fully to them and to scaffold, or facilitate, their growing understandings (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Excitement about self-expression through writing was evident as students described how their writing extended beyond the school. For example, Abigail stated, "I write at home, and I write on vacation, and I write at school, and I write a lot of places. Everywhere I go, I just write!" John said that he wrote "all the way across the United States" when his family drove to Arkansas. Brian reported, "I've taken my story home a couple of times...because I'm so caught up in it. When you have to stop you just say, 'No, I don't want to stop!' So I take it home and work on it there." Writing was the favorite school activity of most of the students.

How did all this enthusiasm come about? What were the "ingredients" that created this classroom broth of high motivation for literacy learning? As indicated previously, the keys were a deep responsiveness to students' self-expression—to their ideas, opinions, feelings, needs, interests, hopes, and dreams. In short, this learner-centered classroom honored students' voices and emphasized the students' making sense of things together. The children's insights will be presented in the following sections through describing the motivating power of self-expression, the motivating power of a rich broth of meaning, the motivating power of choice, and the motivating power of the responsive teacher. Ideas will be provided for teachers to consider how their classrooms might honor students' voices more fully. I conclude with a summarizing discussion of motivation as empowerment.

The motivating power of self-expression

The coresearchers described how important it was to their motivation to be able to express themselves. *A key connection between motivation for literacy and students' self-expression is that through self-expression students link their learning activities with who they are, how they think, and what they care about.* The students expressed themselves through their writing, in reacting and responding to what they read, in small group discussions and projects, and through creative drama, music, and visual arts. Abigail explained why the expressive activities were so motivating:

Penny: Why is writing your favorite?

Abigail: It's fun. It's fun to write because you have all these ideas and stuff, about what to write. If you don't write, you just sort of don't do anything—and it's kind of boring. Everything else is kind of boring.

The following comments by Nicki about story writing are of interest not only because they illustrate her intense and motivating experience in expressing herself through writing but also because they illustrate the insight she has about her writing processes:

Penny: Can you remember how you felt in writing your story?

Nicki: At the beginning it captured a lot of confusion and frustration. It was kind of a matter of teasing it out. Some people plan writing and make a chart and work it out ahead of time. I wrote this story as it came to me. If [the character] was doing [a certain thing] then I felt how he was feeling and knew what would be coming next. For me, if you have an idea, it's not really hard. I was really excited about working on it. I took it home sometimes to write. Sometimes I wrote lots lots lots. Other times I had to stop and think.

Penny: How did you feel about the writing when you had to stop and think?

Nicki: When you stop and think, sometimes you really go blank. You want to start writing, but you don't know what to put. Sometimes the very words come into your head. Sometimes just the idea, and then you have to find the words.

Penny: How do you decide what to write next?

Nicki: It depends on the feelings the character is getting.

Penny: You can feel the feelings of the characters?

Nicki: Sometimes a good writer communicates with the characters in the story, like looking sad or greedy or confused.—[You] get a picture—like it's running through you. You're so scared you kind of feel like crying. You kind of get—the vision looks up to you. You almost get that same feeling. It goes through you and down to the page.

Nicki's writing was a deeply engaging personal act involving self-expression. Her

engagement with writing came about through writing workshop (Atwell, 1987; Calkins, 1991; Rief, 1992), in which there were no deadlines or topics provided for her. Nicki and her classmates experienced a high degree of ownership of their writing. They read and responded to what others wrote, revealing to each other who they were, how they felt, and what they cared about. Susan read and responded to the students' writings, personalizing her feedback to students by posing questions and seeking clarification with the goal of understanding and scaffolding their thinking and always with respect for their ideas.

One powerful vehicle for verbal self-expression was what became known in Susan's class as "big discussions." These discussions often began with some degree of teacher direction or facilitation. The topics frequently connected to thematic units and to issues of concern to students. One series of big discussions emerged from a comparative investigation of folk and fairy tales across cultures and incorporated the then-current censorship issues in California surrounding the Holt *Impressions* reading series (Booth, Booth, Pauli, & Phoenix, 1989). The students considered and critiqued Bruno Bettelheim's (1976) defense of fairy tales and conducted investigations of parent and community opinions on the issues. Abigail then wrote a letter to the editor of the *Los Angeles Times* (Oldfather et al., 1991, p. 141):

Dear Censors: I have heard about banning fairy tales and I don't like it! These parents think that it is lying to children, and [will] make them believe black magic, but it's not. Fairy tales are part of growing up and learning how to cope with real life, and it's also our imagination. If they get away with banning fairy tales children are going to be boring. Also, fairy tales are everywhere. The only way to get rid of fairy tales is for kids to stare at a blank wall. And still they'll get away with imagining. No matter what you do, fairy tales will live forever. And if fairy tales are gone, there won't be such a thing as a kid anymore.

(Signed) Abigail, Disagreeing young reader

One big discussion involved truth in fiction. Students noted that "happily ever after" can be a lie and that "there really are Big Bad Wolves who can be overcome." Susan would sometimes take a seat in the back of the room during big discussions, and students would be fully in charge, expressing their opinions, listening, and debating each other. Students were

free to move about the room, clustering in small subgroups. Students reported that this physical freedom for interpersonal interaction was important for the success of the discussions.

Paul described how Susan invited students' ideas and facilitated the development of their thinking through these big discussions.

What she does is, she lets all of us talk. She says, if you have any ideas or—well, most teachers say, "If you have any ideas raise your hand." Mrs. Holmes will start *us* to say stuff. She'll give us examples or give us ideas, and then we build off of those ideas and say our ideas, final ideas. I don't think this is really a *final* idea because every time you think about something and then you think about something else for it and then you think *that's* your thought but then there's something else about that.... You can express yourself.

In modeling respect for students' opinions, in honoring their voices, Susan enabled students to honor the voices of their classmates.

Paul's comments capture Susan's constructivist style of teaching. She offered ideas and stimulated students' thinking using literature, current events, and challenging questions, and then she invited them to collaborate in figuring things out. Paul experienced the open-endedness of the process in which "knowing" was developed together and in which there was more than one valid or "final" idea. Nicki also valued big discussions.

And I love it when we have big discussions, 'cause I know if you're on a different side you can see the opinions of the other side and maybe learn to accept that they have a point there or something. But that's neat to listen to the other side, and I know I convinced a lot of people about what I believed in....[Teachers at Willow] feel it's very important to know the opinions of other people and not try to teach them opinions to think of because you can't teach an opinion. It's important that you know how other kids feel and their opinions.

In modeling respect for students' opinions, in honoring their voices, Susan enabled students to honor the voices of their class-

mates. In this way, honored voice was a condition of student-student interaction as well as teacher-student interaction.

Students valued self-expression of feelings as well as of ideas. In the following example, Florencia speaks clearly about the connection between the expression of feelings and her motivation. She identified a *hierarchy of feeling* that she used as criteria for determining which were her favorite school subjects. Florencia reported that she enjoyed writing, math, and reading but that she liked writing the most. I asked her to explain why:

Well, *I can express my feelings*. In reading a book, the feelings are already there, and you get to read the feelings of the author. In math there isn't very much feeling. And in writing you get to express *your* feelings. I just enjoy the writing the most because sometimes I can be funny in stories and sometimes I can really get what's in my mind.

Self-expression also occurred through art activities, which were often connected to students' poetry reading and writing. Following are examples from two students who described how they liked to express themselves through their art.

Marcel: Art is also like writing because art—you make yourself. Like you just close your eyes and think of something to draw and then just paint it. It's like painting your mind. Just—you paint what you like.

Penny: You are a poet.

Marcel: Painting your mind is...it doesn't have to look like anything. You can just paint something black and just lines or some weird stuff.

Penny: How is that valuable?

Marcel: Sometimes if you feel really clammed up or something and really don't feel that good, just paint what you want.

Penny: Is that an important thing in school, do you think?

Marcel: They should have some painting because they shouldn't always say paint this and this. Some people don't think of painting as an art; they think of it as a subject. You have to get real good at it. Sometimes you should just paint whatever you want.

John had stated that art was important to him, and I asked him to elaborate:

Penny: Art is important to you personally because...

John: It makes me feel good. It makes me let everything out that I feel. If I feel bad, I can do something fierce. If I feel good, I can do something like mountains and clouds and someone walking around on the hillside. Or something like that. But I can just do what I feel. And that's what I usually do.

These examples illustrate how students' literacy learning permeated various areas of

the curriculum and how deeply connected students felt to literacy activities when they involved self-expression. Self-expression took place freely in this classroom because of several interacting elements. First, the teacher and other students invited, listened to, and responded authentically to what students expressed through discussions, their writing, and through the arts. Second, the teacher emphasized making sense of things rather than just getting the right answer, deeply respecting the thinking of each student and creating an environment in which students felt safe enough to risk expressing ideas and feelings that were important to them. As a result, the rich broth of meaning developed through an integrated thematic curriculum that provided personally relevant food for thought, nurtured and supported students' thinking processes, and stimulated them to *want* to express their ideas and feelings. The next section will focus on this rich broth of meaning.

The motivating power of a "rich broth of meaning"

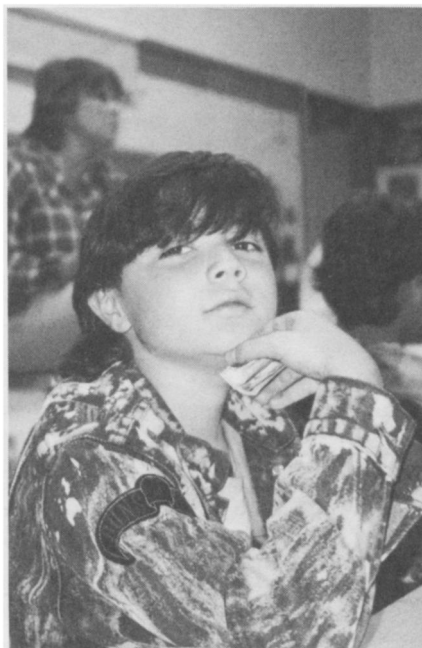
The classroom provided a richness of experience and thought that nurtured students' thinking and feeling, thus moving them to express themselves and to be engaged in literacy processes. Emphasis was placed not so much on meanings valued by a textbook author or even by the teacher but on the students' personal constructions of meaning. Susan described her philosophy:

Ultimately, it's meaning that counts—*your meaning*. The ultimate value in what you're doing is in the *meaning* of it which is really unrelated to the skills part...except the skills support the meaning. And they support being able to access it.

But there are lots of ways, especially in our world now, to access meaning. Dancers access it one way, and musicians access it another. So I really think that children need to value themselves as individuals, with their own strengths, and understand that there's not just one way to be successful or to get at anything. You can get at anything through anything else. So we've got to find those paths. Language is a powerful tool, and so it's really extra important to me. A story accesses emotions and feelings. It creates a life. It creates a pathway emotionally to get into meaning.

The classroom emphasis on personal meaning was felt by the students. They wanted to understand things. Paul's view of the importance of this for his motivation was reflected earlier in his comment that "you do better be-

Students in Mrs. Homes's class share their ideas on the importance of self-expression.



Paul: "The only thing you can own is thoughts."



Nicki: "You can't teach an opinion. It's important that you know how other kids feel and their opinions."



Marcel: "[Art is] like painting your mind."

cause learning is more important than getting the right answer."

A large part of the curriculum was based on thematic units, often negotiated with students, which served as a means of developing the rich broth of meaning. Examples of themes were Across Generations, Quest Fantasies, Ecology and Technology, and With What You Have (a unit about building on strengths to overcome problems such as oppression, prejudice, poverty, or handicaps).

The units allowed students to pursue depth in their learning. Textbooks were used only occasionally as an additional resource. Abigail contrasted textbook learning with the depth that she gained from reading *National Geographic*:

In the textbook they just have plain facts, nothing that you can find out in *National Geographic*. They have archaeologists' spots where they last been and stuff. And what they found. And in textbooks they just have boring stuff like the names of people and what they did for the last 15 years or something. And it's really kind of real boring. And in the *National Geographic*, they tell the person and what they found. And they take pictures of what it was and how they did it, what years it was from, and

not just how many years they have been working or something. They show things that you more likely want to know than what you have to know.

Andrew described his experience in conducting an interview with a person from China who was living in the community:

Andrew: It was a lot of fun to interview somebody. I sort of like the idea that you had to keep on probing, going deeper and asking questions.

Penny: What is it about probing that makes it interesting to you?

Andrew: I don't know. It's sort of fun to find out the real truth.

The meaningfulness of the curriculum was enriched through many kinds of resources for inquiry: trade books, reference materials, newspapers, phone books, computer programs, and places and people in the community. Students learned and shared what they learned through many different kinds of projects such as writing and publishing stories and poems, submitting letters to the editor, producing original plays, and presenting choral readings, newscasts, songs, and graphic arts.

A key aspect in the classroom inquiry was finding the connections among the various

substantive themes that were developed with flexibility for the needs of the students. Susan described in an interview how some of the units developed during the year.

I'm constantly looking, when I design these thematic units, for what kinds of writing, what kinds of reading will really get them a rich meaning broth. You have to be flexible enough to follow if the students are needing something different.

You think through what you're going to do...and the thing that amazes me is that it always fits. For example, I did that whole light unit. We started with color and the Lawrence Hall of Science unit, and then we got into all different parts of light. And then I was going to do optical illusions.

I had been concerned because there were a few students who were being mean to each other in class. We were able to connect the study of optical illusions with the study of stereotyping. They learned how your eye sees upside down but your brain automatically turns it over. So then we're going to try to transfer that to our social stereotypes. So we were going from optical illusions to stereotypes to the whole notion that the brain searches for patterns. And [the brain] processes in terms of what it expects to see and in patterns that it is familiar with. I'll be really interested to see in another month what these students are going to understand. They never cease to amaze me. I'm always amazed how the year just flows.

Susan reported that in the culmination of these inquiries many students were able to articulate in their own ways that we may understand light as particle or wave, depending on how we frame a question, and that people may be appreciated or unfairly stereotyped, depending on our mindsets.

The students enjoyed challenges to their thinking and expressed the motivating aspects of just the right challenge. For example, John described his pleasure in an assignment: "That was just the most interesting stuff. We got some really difficult questions that made me smile. It made me want to laugh. After a while you get used to it and it's really fun."

The motivating power of choice

Students said that having choice was one of the main reasons they felt so motivated to learn. They were allowed many choices within the well-established structures and requirements of the classroom. Choices ranged from small to wide open. I did not ask them directly about the importance of choice, but most students brought choice into our interview dialogues:

Paul: Here at Willow you can kind of do what you want. Not exactly what you want, but you can kind of do what you want. Without that...what's life without choices? There's not a life without choices.

And even if you're younger, you should still have choices.

Marcel: Choice is very important. Like in reading, if I want to read, I'll be excited and do it. If I don't, I won't be interested and won't learn as much. Sometimes it's good to have assigned reading, like to help you find a new author or a new subject like archaeology. But only you know the feeling you want to write about.

Nicki: If reading is something we all need to do, why not read something that we enjoy, so that later on we will want to read more and more! (Oldfather & Thomas, 1991, p. 118)

Several students emphasized the importance of having choice about topics for their reading and for special projects.

Marcel: If you *want* to learn something—it's fun. It's boring if you don't want to learn it. Ask the kids what they want to learn about. But the kids should be serious. They shouldn't get carried away and say "Oh yeah, I want to learn about something that's 'way out.'" But if it's really something serious that they really do want to learn about, you should give them a chance.

John described the dilemma of offering choices quite poignantly: "I *want* to *want* to do a science project. But I can't want to do a science project if they say you have to do a science project." John actually did not have choice about whether to do a science project in Susan's classroom, but he did have choice about what kind of project to do and about how he would share what he had learned. Abigail summed up why choice helped promote her motivation:

What you *want* to know is usually funner stuff. Most kids think [archaeology] is really boring. But I think it's really fun. You kind of don't need to know it unless you're gonna be an archaeologist or something. But I need to know it because I want to be an archaeologist. And I want to know it. At school sometimes they make you have to do it all, but...they don't really tell you what you want to know. They just kind of give you an idea about what there is to know.

Abigail's statement expresses how having choices about learning helps her pursue personally relevant reading about interesting topics. Her commentary also identifies the challenge of developing curriculum that is more than a survey and curriculum that gets into enough depth to make learning interesting.

Students especially valued having choice about the pacing of their work. A flexible structure was allowed through reading and writing workshops that enabled students to set their own goals, as Nicki indicated when speaking to an audience at The Claremont

Reading Conference:

The famous phrase given [by Mrs. Holmes]... when we ask, "How long does it have to be?" is "As long as your imagination will take you." Choices like this encourage us to write. When we're given a specific length, we feel pressured—pressured to meet a deadline. Or perhaps we feel as though we have a mental block, and we just don't know what to write. By telling us that we can make a paper as long or as short as we want, we get a less pressured feeling, which, believe it or not, leads us to write the longest paper we ever wrote. (Oldfather & Thomas, 1991, p. 118)

Josh appreciated the pacing in the classroom: "She doesn't say, 'Zoom, you have to do this in 5 minutes or else!' She's not like that. She's moderate. She gives us enough time, but not too much time."

The motivating power of the responsive teacher

The students had much to say about their teacher. They appreciated Susan's enthusiasm, humor, and fun-loving presence. They said that the most important attributes of a motivating teacher were caring, understanding, trusting, and respecting students' ideas, opinions, and feelings. They also believed it was important for a teacher to hold high expectations and to explain things—but to avoid telling all the answers. For example, Lauren commented on how Susan allowed the students to assume responsibility.

Mrs. Holmes makes it fun for the kids. She lets us participate, and she lets *us* tell the answers. She doesn't tell all the answers. She knows that she's not perfect.

Lauren's observation that "she knows that she's not perfect" was offered as a high compliment and was a reflection of Susan's humanity. Susan openly shared her feelings in many ways: sharing her processes as an author and her concerns about the problems and issues in the real world, sharing her passions about books (she cried in the sad parts), sharing her struggles to figure out how to help students with a particular concept or skill, and sharing her concerns for students when interpersonal issues arose in the classroom. This personal quality of Susan Holmes's teaching style and the openness of her self-expression were very important in establishing a responsive and nurturing classroom climate that enabled students to express their feelings and ideas so fully.

Nicki: Mrs. Holmes is really understanding.

Penny: Understanding of what?

Nicki: Understanding your feelings about what you're writing. Or understanding what you're doing. Or *why* you don't understand it. And not thinking that you're a dummy or something. Helping you. Really helpful and cooperating.

The presence of mutual respect between teacher and students was reflected in Lily's words:

She has this chime, and instead of screaming her head off for everybody to be quiet or clapping her hands, she has this chime which is real pretty....She mainly has everything under control because everybody respects her because she's a good teacher and she cares.

Translating honored voice to classroom practice

A teacher might respond to the ideas presented thus far by saying, "I would like to provide more choices, to emphasize students' construction of meaning, and to honor their voices, but how can this be translated into practice in my classroom?" The challenge is to achieve a comfortable balance between choice and structure that takes into account (a) the needs and interests of students, (b) administrative and curricular requirements, (c) teachers' personal styles, and (d) comfort levels for sharing control and responsibility with students.

Responsive teachers do not relinquish power, they *share* power and responsibility, providing a continually evolving balance between choice and structure. They negotiate with students within appropriate arenas; they provide ground rules; and they make clear what the "givens" are and what students' options are within those givens. Students may perceive being able to make even small decisions (e.g., when to use the restroom or to throw paper in the wastebasket) as important indicators of their self-determination in the classroom.

Teachers wishing to offer more choices for their students may want to start by experimenting in small ways, within limited time periods, or in only certain areas of the curriculum. Making too many changes at once might be difficult and discouraging. Gradual experimentation, preferably in collaboration with colleagues, in offering students opportunities for self-expression and choice allows teachers a more comfortable means of working toward change.

Teachers may begin by assessing what they are already doing in their classrooms to honor students' voices. Next they may wish to identify approaches that would suit their particular classroom in becoming more responsive to students. The following groups of questions may serve as tools for self-assessment and as guides for change.

1. *Invite students to express themselves more fully.* Do students feel they can express their ideas, feelings, opinions, and needs without fear of criticism? Do I offer opportunities throughout the day for written, oral, and artistic expression in relation to all areas of the curriculum? Do I pose questions in open-ended ways that communicate that students' opinions are important and valid? Do I provide for wait time, and do I structure discussions that allow open participation? Do I allow some freedom of movement to enable students to communicate with each other? Do I structure reading and writing activities that elicit students' thinking and ideas?

2. *Listen and respond to students and encourage them to listen and respond to each other.* Do I take opportunities to write thoughtful responses to students' journals, reading logs, and writing? Do I communicate my full interest in and respect for what they are saying as they express themselves? Do I structure many classroom activities that are student-centered, rather than teacher-centered (e.g., small group work, dyads), to allow me to share control and responsibility and to free me to give individual time and attention?

3. *Exhibit and share students' ideas and products.* Do students have an opportunity to present their research findings to appropriate audiences? Are students able to publish their work for class books and magazines, to submit letters to the editor, and to submit writings to national publications? Are students' creative products mounted and hung for others to appreciate? Are parents invited to school for special events? Do I read students' stories and poems aloud to the class? Do I provide opportunities for presentation of plays, skits, or improvisation?

4. *Provide students choices about what they will learn, how they will learn, and how their learning should be evaluated.* Do students have a voice in establishing their own goals and topics for reading, writing, and inquiry in content areas? Do they have options

when creating products through which they share what they have learned with others? Do students have some choice in the pacing of their learning activities? Do they have some say about the order in which they do their assignments within certain time blocks? Do students participate in establishing criteria for quality products and in self-evaluation? Are students involved in planning, problem solving, and organizational decision-making about the classroom and the school? Do they have some choices about where to study and with whom to study? Do students have some opportunity for physical movement, and do they have individual responsibility for water and bathroom privileges? Do I show students that I honor their voices by demonstrating a willingness not only to listen and negotiate but also to act upon their ideas and suggestions when I feel that I can do so?

Motivation as empowerment

Ultimately issues of student motivation for literacy have to do with empowerment. For students to take personal ownership of their literacy learning, they need to feel that they have been able to have some say about what happens in their classrooms; they need to choose personally interesting and relevant books, projects, and writing topics; they need to know that their voices have been heard. Confronting issues of student empowerment requires educators to examine deeply held personal and professional beliefs about sharing control and responsibility with students.

Susan's classroom provides a vision for how this might be done. Susan did not relinquish her power, but she did share it. She provided a balance of choice and structure. The main source of Susan's power was through sharing power with her students. And they knew it.

Among the many simple but personal gifts presented to Susan on the last day of school were poems written by some of her students. On a tie-dyed shirt in soft pastels was a poem composed and handwritten by Paul, a graduating sixth grader:

The Seeds and the Sun

As the colors of the hill run up the horizon, the sun
creeps down, sneaking, hiding.
The wind mill turns and creaks from the wind that
blows and blows, never ending, never beginning.

The moon wakes up, opens its eyes.
A tear runs down for it is happy it is starting.

The stars twinkle and shine, burning their last breath of life.

The people marvel and wonder as it opens their heart.

A teacher picks up her wand,
Implanting huge imaginations in young children.
She picks only the plump to be in her wondrous class.

Then a miraculous magical beam of new light breaks the barrier.

Another tear runs down the cheek of the moon for it has come to an end.

As the colors of the hill tumble down the horizon.

Thanks, Mrs. Holmes.

We were the seeds and you were the sun.

Paul—June, 1990

Paul's metaphor of the students as seeds and the teacher as sun captured the dynamics in this classroom that nurtured motivation for literacy learning. The focus was on the power of the seeds rather than on the power of the sun. The seeds contained all the impulses for growth and development. The sun shared her power and warmth. The seeds realized their potential.

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